



**University of
Zurich**^{UZH}

**Zurich Open Repository and
Archive**

University of Zurich
University Library
Strickhofstrasse 39
CH-8057 Zurich
www.zora.uzh.ch

Year: 2000

Video, archive, storage: Moscow performance art in the age of digital repetition

Haensgen, Sabine ; Monastyrski, Andrej

Posted at the Zurich Open Repository and Archive, University of Zurich

ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-122843>

Scientific Publication in Electronic Form

Published Version

Originally published at:

Haensgen, Sabine; Monastyrski, Andrej (2000). Video, archive, storage: Moscow performance art in the age of digital repetition. PieLab Media: ARTMargins online.

ARTMARGINS_[online]

[\(/index.php\)](/index.php)

HOME (/) BLOG ([HTTP://BLOG.ARTMARGINS.COM](http://blog.artmargins.com))

ARTMARGINS PRINT ([HTTP://WWW.MITPRESSJOURNALS.ORG/LOI/ARTM](http://www.mitpressjournals.org/loi/artm))

ARTIST EDITIONS ([/INDEX.PHP/SUPPORT-AMO](/index.php/support-amo))

ARCHIVE ([/INDEX.PHP/ARCHIVE](/index.php/archive)) ABOUT AMO

Search ARTMargins

[New In ARTMargins Print
\(/index.php/110-about-artmargins/news/506-new-in-artmargins-print\)](/index.php/110-about-artmargins/news/506-new-in-artmargins-print)

ARTMARGINS
VOLUME 4 · ISSUE 1



ARTMargins Print

(<http://www.mitpressjournals.org>

</loi/artm>) has released its new issue, 4.3. (October 2015)!

Special Issue on Capitalist Realism

Articles: [J. Hamilton Faris](#)

[\(<http://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/abs/10.1162>](http://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/abs/10.1162)

[/ARTM_a_00122#.VjL2yc7OAIZ\)](/ARTM_a_00122#.VjL2yc7OAIZ)

(Manoa) on Akasegawa Genpei's take on capitalist reality.

[Maibritt Borgen](#)

[\(<http://www.mitpressjournals.org>](http://www.mitpressjournals.org)

VIDEO, ARCHIVE, STORAGE: MOSCOW PERFORMANCE ART IN THE AGE OF DIGITAL REPETITION

WRITTEN BY SABINE HÄNSGEN (BREMEN)

PUBLISHED: 26 AUGUST 2000

Andrey Monastyrski lives and works in Moscow where he studied philology. Since 1971/72 he has created serial structures and minimalist sound compositions. In the mid-1970s, he began to be interested in poetic objects and performance actions. Monastyrski is one of the founding members of the group *Collective Actions*.

[Performance for S. Romasko \(Video\), 1989.](#)

[Performance for S. Romasko \(Video\), 1989.](#)

[\(/content/images/Haensgen.gif\)](/content/images/Haensgen.gif)

Collective Actions (Kollektivnye deistviya) was founded in 1976 by Andrey Monastyrski, Nikolai Panitkov, Georgi Kiesel'valter, and Nikita Alexeyev. Elena Elagina, Igor Makarevic, and Sergei Romasko joined the group at a later stage. *Collective Actions* (whose composition has changed frequently over time) quickly became one of the nubs of Moscow conceptualism. The

group is best known for its conspiratorial "Trips Out of Town" where many of its "actions" took place. So far, *Collective Actions* has published seven volumes documenting its work. Two years ago, the Moscow publishing house Ad Marginem published a selection from the first five volumes under the title *Kollektivnye deistviya: Poezdki za gorod (Collective Actions: Trips Out of Town)*.

S. H.: In connection with the work on the videothèque, I would like to discuss with you the role played by the media in the documentation of *Kollektivnye deistviya* [*Collective Actions*; henceforth CA]. When talking about the media, it is important to take into account the various documentary recording technologies, each of which is centered around a specific apparatus. The video camera appeared relatively late in the aesthetic practice of Moscow conceptualism, with a certain delay compared to Western art. This can be explained by the fact that in the Soviet Union this kind of information technology was under the strict control of the State and not available for individual use. Although it seems as if you could always freely use photography as a technical means of reproduction even for private purposes. Already the first performances of CA were documented with the help of photography. Still,

[/doi/abs/10.1162](#)

[/ARTM_a_00121#.VjL3Dc7OAIz\)](#)

(New Haven) considers
life-material in Öyvind
Fahlström's *Kisses Sweeter
than Wine*.

In the **Document section**
we present, for the first
time in English, Akasegawa
Genpei's "The *Objet* after
Stalin." [FREE ACCESS](#)

[/http://www.mitpressjournals.org](http://www.mitpressjournals.org)

[/doi/pdfplus/10.1162](#)

[/ARTM_a_00126](#).

(Introduction by [Pedro J.
Erber](#)

[/http://www.mitpressjournals.org](http://www.mitpressjournals.org)

[/doi/pdfplus/10.1162](#)

[/ARTM_a_00125](#)))

Artist Project: Stephanie
Syjuco, *Cargo Cults*. [FREE
ACCESS](#)

[/http://www.mitpressjournals.org](http://www.mitpressjournals.org)

[/doi/pdfplus/10.1162](#)

[/ARTM_a_00123](#).

[/http://www.mitpressjournals.org](http://www.mitpressjournals.org)

[/doi/pdf/10.1162](#)

[/ARTM_a_00072](#))

Review Article: [Andrew
Stefan Weiner](#)

[/http://www.mitpressjournals.org](http://www.mitpressjournals.org)

[/doi/abs/10.1162](#)

[/ARTM_r_00124#.VjL3U87OAIz\)](#)

(New York) reviews *Living
with Pop Kunsthalle*
Düsseldorf

[Click here for more](#)

[information at the MIT](#)

[Press ARTMargins site](#)

[/http://www.mitpressjournals.org](http://www.mitpressjournals.org)

[/loi/artm](#)).

generally speaking I have gained the impression that in the factographic discourse of CA it is the more traditional media that are dominant. When you look carefully you can find depictions of these traditional, older types of media in the recordings of CA's most recent projects. For instance, there are several documentaries with various actions (direct speech gestures such as, for example, the spontaneous statement by N. Panitkov in the performance entitled "The Opening"), and then a scene that shows you in the process of typing a description of that action on a typewriter; a translation of the event into the conventional environment of written language. During the time of typing we can see how the person who is typing formulates the descriptive text, pauses, reflects, finds the appropriate words. The typewriter moves horizontally, it rings when a carriage return is necessary, the process of formulation is accompanied by the almost musical rhythm of the fingers hitting the keys. Inside the video you can also follow the process of photography: a person with a camera moves across a snow field around an object (in the performance "To Makarevich", a black box). The person makes strange movements that the outside spectator does not completely understand because they do not seem to have an obvious function. What we are witnessing is the mystery of a search process, the choice of a point of view. These video tapes show the appropriation of video as an instrument to fixate and at the same time analyze a situation. In the performance "Video", Sergey Romasko is in a field through the monitor of a video camera, follows the instructions on the tape, a story about how to use this new recording apparatus that is new to him, and then what follows is already his first attempt at recording. How do you see the role of the visual media, especially photography and video, in the factographic discourse of CA against the background of the tradition of textualized depictions in the history of culture, where the text plays the dominant role and where we are dealing not with the mimetic depiction of the visual but rather with a pointer to the sphere of invisible meanings?

A. M.: I think that the traditional text in its capacity as a pointer to the sphere of invisible meanings is still the basic carrier of the semantic side of CA's activity. The seriality of our performances is primarily aimed at the exposure of abstract linguistic and aesthetic categories. The actions of a performance occur not so much in actual "fields" as in textual spaces. All these fields of expectation and empty actions are not so much psychological as categorical concepts. Their documentation in the form of photographs or slides is significant as an application or instrumentalization. Not only in the sense that such recording imprints the fragments of an event-its stages-in memory, but also so that in the process of further discourse new textual and conceptual spaces can emerge, specifically a factographic discourse as a sphere of secondary artistic creation. In the further stages of our development (beginning perhaps with "Ten Appearances"), the phenomenon of "the secondary without the primary" emerged. The formal circumstances of plot constructions also began to be conditioned exclusively by text. This is when the third and fourth volume of the cycle "Trips Out Of Town" came into being, where events occur only in the sphere of language. It is also interesting that in these two volumes there is no sense of repetitiveness with regard to, say, the first volume. Meanwhile in the fifth and seventh volumes (on which we are

working at the moment), there is such a sense. Here we try to as it were "continue" the actions of the first stage (for example, "Picture II", or "Tent 2"). The effort to as it were "embrace" a primary event in the early performances has an ambiguous result and forces us to think more generally about what an event is. Perhaps an event is not simply a spatio-temporal experience but something very contextual, something that changes continuously and has no fixed characteristics, escaping all definitions even on the level of the most basic categories, such as "primary" or "secondary". We could also say that the actions contained in the third and fourth volume are secondary with regard to the linguistic structures that appear total and primary; in the performance entitled "Appearance" (first volume), the linguistic structures represented still nothing but the possibility of interpretation which, by the way, in the mid 1980s, was seen as a linguistic event. What I want to say is that for CA the problem of documentation is interesting only insofar as the means of documentation take part in the construction of specific aesthetic spaces, and nothing else.

S. H.: For CA, documentation is not limited to visibility and, as such, not aesthetically self-sufficient. The reactions of the spectators to the video recordings are remarkable. If they do not look at them in the context of some external commentary or the textual field as such, the spectators-to the extent that they did not themselves participate in the performance-are bored. What causes this justifiably bored reaction? Part of it is that the spectators feel excluded from the primary event. They are not inside the situation, something they feel all the more acutely when they watch a documentary video recording of the performance, because such a recording suggests the highest degree of mimetic proximity to reality. Here the spatio-temporal situation is reduced to the two-dimensional video screen. The spectators cannot act from within that situation. They cannot go here or there, they cannot even turn their heads in the other direction. If they want to watch, they have to sit in front of the TV screen. In this way, many of their desires and all free subjective perception are blocked. The action is determined by the perception of the apparatus. What we are dealing with is not subjective time but the time of the apparatus. How would you determine the interrelationship between video as factography and the reality of the events recorded?

A. M.: There are two groups of spectators for "Trips Out Of Town" (or at least two basic ones), even though in actual fact there are of course many more. When I talk about spectators I have in mind those who were present during our performances, while you are thinking of completely peripheral viewers who are dealing only with documentary recordings of our work, with texts, etc. This is a difficult problem because even those "actual" spectators who were present during the performance were often dealing with recordings because it was on the level of recording that these actions unfolded. These were either false recordings or photographs, texts, and objects from a previous series of performances. Even then, at the time of the event, there were such "journeys", immersions in the space of recordings. This was the case even at the time of the performances contained in the first volume, such as "The Place of the Action". It seems to me that the peripheral activities of the spectators are connected not so much with recording as with literature. There is of course an

element of documentation in that literature, but that element is its most basic constituent component. This is a well-known device that we find, for example, in the novels of Dos Passos and in the whole tradition of prose that uses documentary texts. The same could be said about visual material, photographs, slides, video. For the peripheral viewer, these also do not constitute "documentary" material but art, and that is precisely why they may appear tedious. An interesting example of this is the action "A Work: A Painting". In this performances we used a picture made of a documentary slide from a 1978 performance entitled "The Third Variant." Yet what was important to us in this project was not at all the demonstration of the picture but the creation of an experimental environment for the "observation of spectators observing a picture". The thing was that in this performance the viewers were not simply standing in a field, staring at some picture. Their observation point was in a certain way determined by the structure not only of the concrete performance as it unfolded before them, but also by that of previous performances where we were concerned with the problem of "groups"-I am thinking of such happenings as "Bus Stop", "Exit", "Group 3". I will not analyze the structure of "A Work: A Painting", since Mikhail Ryklin has already done this in his short story about the performance (on the observer positions). His main point is that we had to "elevate" the spectators, to introduce them into the specific structural linguistic field in such a way that they were as it were on the same level as the picture sitting on the edge of the field; so that they would find themselves in the same "dwelling" with it, on one and the same demonstrational aesthetic level, so that we could say: "There is a picture and spectators in the field." I should point out that such a homogenous space emerged only from the vantage point of Ryklin's own perspective, and not that of all spectators. Only from Ryklin's observation point were the painting and the spectators on one and the same level, "in one dwelling." The reason is that Ryklin saw the spectators as an aesthetic group, that is to say in the same space of aesthetics where the picture that was located behind his back had been from the beginning. Yet the group of spectators as such was under no obligation to look anywhere-not at Ryklin and not at the picture, since the latter simply participated in the creation of that axis "spectators-painting", while at the same time being one of the constituent parts of this visual "dumbbell". Apart from that, the creation of a group of spectators in such an "objective" function demanded the presence of two more visual vantage points other than Ryklin's own: the "free" viewers by the picture (=those who did not participate in the performance), and the "invisible" spectator Sorokin who was not familiar with the plot of the performance and who was lying next to me in the field. Even though it does not directly concern your question, I mention all this to make it clear that in the discourse of CA not only textual documents can be transformed into literature but also visual material that is considered documentary. In the discourse of CA, such material turns into something that resembles the visual arts. The question as to whether documentary video, too, is transformed analogously into cinema would, I think, require special examination.

S. H.: Compared to the representations of the mass media, there is at first glance little information in the video documentaries of CA. Forced to follow a real-time action in which almost nothing happens, the spectators may find it

boring, unpleasant, or sometimes even unbearable to watch this kind of material. The images are quite empty, there is nothing distracting in them. In Hollywood cinema, not everything is shown in real time, and therefore, in order to create a suspenseful action, the plot concentrates on the most interesting moments. In Hollywood movies, the glance of the camera is directed at the attractive bodies of the actors and actresses, while in the CA video documentaries we are mostly confronted figures who are speaking and who seem forever to be disappearing somewhere. In the documentaries of CA there is no attractive spectacle, there are no special effects, no new audio-visual technologies (tricks, monsters, etc.). Everything is extremely ordinary. The video-technique is modest and amateurish; basically anyone could use it in order to create his or her personal archive by filming something for himself as a souvenir. In that sense these recordings do not express a specific authorial style, they are almost anonymous. They are as it were "machine recordings". All you have to do is set it up, and click. Since there is not the same visual autonomy that we find in the cinema, the viewer cannot simply sit back in her chair and have a good time. She can, however, embark on a "secondary" journey across the various layers of the documentary, reconstructing the event and examining her own position. What are your ideas in this regard?

A. M.: I see this issue completely differently. Already at the beginning of the 1970s Nikita Alekseev told me about a Japanese film in which absolutely nothing happens. All that is shown for an hour and a half is a man walking his dog through some deserted places. I never saw this film myself and I don't even know its title but for some reason I remembered it for its unusually interesting minimalist plot. To give another example, your "Video Recording BACH" is, in my opinion, also an excellent movie. By the way, I remember that Nikita was saying then that the Japanese film's last episode-it is now evening and the stars are shining-shows the man climb up a hill, and then the camera as it were looks through his eyes, climbing higher and higher (it is already evening and the stars are beginning to show in the sky; the beginning of the film still happened in broad daylight). And then for quite some time all you can see are the stars and then it seems as if there is music by Bach. I like especially this kind of "empty" cinema that does not contain any attractive bodies. Attractive bodies often make me angry. In a way, the video recordings of the performances organized by CA are minimalist movies. I like especially the recordings in the 6th volume of "Trips Out Of Town", such as "Tenth Notebook", "The Opening", and so on. Despite this minimalist thrust, the working method of CA no doubt allows for the possibility of filming an action from beginning to end; in fact, this possibility existed already in the performance "The Place of the Action" with its "lateral", additional shots. We could for example make a video out of how we approached the lake yesterday, starting at that point in Ozereckij from where you overlook the valley, on the road to Rogacevo. We would use a few simple twists of a minimalist plot in order to show how a person moves from the unfinished summer house to the lake.

S. H.: I still think that we do not have to look at this kind of video recordings as separate works of art. They are rather fragments of a vast multi-layered archive that points to something that is located outside of itself. This kind of documentary practice not only delimits the boundaries of the concrete work, it

also directs our attention towards what happens beyond the boundaries of the text. An open series of different types of references emerges, pointers to something "other". That is why you cannot really treat these videos as unified films in a cinematic sense. It seems to me that for the moment the best way to represent them is the videothèque, a space where not only the video recordings themselves would be collected but also other accompanying material. In that space of the videothèque you can spend as much time as you want, watching videos, reading, immersing yourself in the material, finding things that strike your interest. But you have still other ideas concerning the use of video-inside installations, for example?

A. M.: As I said before, for me there is also an autonomous layer in these video recordings, I can watch them simply as a meditative films. I admit that this is not the case for all videos but only for those where there are, to use your phrase, "figures that always disappear somewhere". You are right, the videothèque is the most fitting way to present these videos because some things you can watch more or less autonomously, while with others you need additional material and explanations. As far as the use of videos in installations is concerned, I am very cautious because there is the separate artistic practice of video installations. I have two projects for installations that use one and the same video recording ("The Depot"). One is "Journey to the West", and the other "The Text in the Zone of Indistinguishability". Both projects contain material from performances by CA. I look at the video aspect in both these installations for the most part as an atmospheric element, especially since "The Depot" is a minimalist video made up of ten-minute-long episodes of a still shot showing various views of a railroad track and a railway station in the winter. By the way, sometimes I watch this recording by itself, as a background. To me the experience is the same as listening to classical music in the background.

S. H.: How do you view other possibilities for the media representation of documentary material by CA, for example through hypertext. This opens up a multitude of different links between various types of material (description, text, sound, video, animation). By comparison with the old hermetic forms of documentation used by CA-archives that allow access only to certain people-the internet allows for a maximum degree of anonymous openness.

A. M.: Since I am very fond of putting together all kinds of lists and tables, hypertext is for me a very interesting opportunity. I am fascinated by the way in which when we use hypertext we come across unexpected connections between completely different spheres. Of course in order to establish a network of references or a paradigm you have to work with the medium yourself. I am basically not against the idea of "anonymous openness", and some of the performances staged by CA were in fact based on that anonymity. This was the case, for example, in "A Series of Political Slogans". We hung up the slogans so that someone whom we did not know would see them. The internet functions perhaps in a similar way. Of course it makes no sense to throw all material into the net; hermeticism and temporal succession have to be preserved as principles for text generation. But as an anonymous space, as "space", the internet can be of interest for the work of CA.

Translated from Russian by Sven Spieker and Anahit Simoyan.

Bremen, March 2000

Sabine Hänsen, a cultural historian who lives and works in Bremen, has participated in the performances and happenings of *Collective Actions*. The following discussion focuses on the media archivization that has accompanied the group's activities from the very beginning.

[terms of use \(/index.php/component/content/90-miscellaneous/miscellaneous/91-privacy-policy?Itemid=129\)](#) | [privacy policy \(/index.php/component/content/90-miscellaneous/miscellaneous/91-privacy-policy?Itemid=129\)](#) | ISSN 1941-4102 ©1999-2016 ARTMargins. All rights reserved.

site by PIELAB MEDIA (<http://www.pielabmedia.com/>)